DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 684 CS 212 969

AUTHOR Favre, Betty Atkinson
TITLE From Plato to Wall Street: A Rhetoric Program for MBA's.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions (10th, Ypsilanti, MI, April 3-5, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; College Curriculum; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Management Development; *Masters Programs; Program Descriptions; *Rhetoric; *Technical Writing; Writing for Publication; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Frostburg State University MD; Masters of Business Administration; Technical Communication

ABSTRACT

The Technical-Professional Communication (TPC) Option at Maryland's Frostburg State University is a response to the growing demand from government, business, and industry to prepare MBAs to meet the high performance requirements of managers who must communicate and communicators who must manage. Students taking this 15-hour writing-intensive option are full-time working professionals, largely managers, in a variety of fields. Program objectives are to enhance students' abilities to think, write, make ideas visual, and speak effectively. The courses are structured to open up the five processes that generate successful professional communication: writing, research, illustration, speaking, and publishing. The TPC curriculum features five courses (Persuasive Writing, Editing and Production, Writing for Publication, Business Report Writing, and Technical and Scientific Communication) offered in a sequence that builds concept upon concept, one course each semester in the evenings, year-round. The pedagogical strategies are grounded in the case study approach. Case studies are often developed in workshops that feature realistic links to business and help students develop the necessary interpersonal skills for collaboratively producing effective documents. A major focus of all the courses is using desktop publishing to make ideas visual. Another is the development of a state-of-the-art professional writing style. The TPC Option's overall approach is humanistic in that it teaches the traditions of western rhetoric from Plato to the present. The TPC Option helps students to objectify the traditions of rhetoric--to define, describe and apply them--so that they can use them to maximum effect in their professional lives. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED335684

FROM PLATO TO WALL STREET:

A RHETORIC PROGRAM FOR Mba's

Betty Atkinson Favre
English Department
Frostburg State University
Frostburg, Maryland 21532

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. M Vaght

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS212969

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The business world is acutely aware that good management demands excellent communications skills, both oral and written. Yet the sad fact is that most professionals are not equipped with the special rhetorical skills necessary to communicate with maximum effect on the job.

To address this problem, I will describe a unique, humanistic component to an MBA degree program: the Technical-Professional Communication Option, Frostburg State University's response to the growing demand from government, business, and industry to prepare MBAs to meet the high performance requirements of managers who must communicate and communicators who must manage.

The TPC Option is a collaborative venture between the University's Schools of Business and Arts/Humanities. As a fully credentialled, fifteen-hour communication concentration, the TPC Option provides a rigorous, writing-intensive program that incorporates the best rhetorical traditions from ancient Greece and Rome, which have shaped Western thinking for more than 2500 years, as well as the contributions of the great moderns who have defined and described the nature of successful professional communication today.

The TPC Option is administered by the English Department, and its courses are taught by English Department faculty as well as adjunct instructors drawn from the business and professional communities. Because the TPC Option enriches our MBA degree, it attracts upwardly mobile individuals. These students are full-time working professionals in a variety of fields, ninety-

five percent managers. The program caters to the needs, interests, and expectations of this audience, as well as to the specific demands of the marketplace and the writing-across-the curriculum goals of the university.

In this presentation I will discuss the objectives of the TPC Option, the curriculum and pedagogical strategies, and its grounding in solid theoretical and strategic rhetoric. Along the way, I will allude to its fortuitous results--for the students and the University. My purpose here is to share with you a pedagogical model that works, as well as the empowering perspective that both informs this model and makes it work.

TPC OPTION OBJECTIVES

The objectives of our program are to enhance students' abilities to think, to write, to make ideas visual, and to speak effectively; for these are, of course, the keys to success in any business or professional venture. We help our students use these keys to unlock their intellectual potentials for problem-solving, logic, persuasion, and argumentation; their aesthetic potentials for creating graphic and photo/art designs as well as for formatting and layout; and their ethical sensibilities for motivating audiences and thus, achieving their purposes. By unlocking these potentials and sensibilities, we also help our students develop genuine confidence in their writing.

To unlock their capabilities for growth, we structure our courses to open up the five processes that generate successful professional communication. These are the writing process, the

research process, the illustration process, the speaking process and the publishing process. These are the five processes that, in fact, liberate the power of language.

TPC OPTION CURRICULUM

Specifically, we teach our students how to write business, technical, and scientific reports that get the results they are supposed to get; how to hone their writing into a highly readable (and therefore marketable) professional writing style; how to make professional oral presentations that accomplish their purposes; how to write, design, edit, and publish documents that advance corporate goals and promote public relations; how to write articles for professional journals; and how to get their articles published. Thus, the content of our curriculum meets the specific demands of the marketplace; and our five-process approach helps students use the power of language to meet those demands.

The TPC Curriculum features five courses, offered in a sequence that builds concept upon concept, one course each semester in the evenings, year-round (including summers). These courses, in sequence, are: Persuasive Writing, Editing and Production, Writing for Publication, Business Report Writing, and Technical and Scientific Communication. The details of these courses appear in the syllabi which I have included for you in my handouts.

TPC PEDAGOGY: THE CASE STUDY

We ground our pedagogical strategies in the case study approach. In fact, our whole MBA degree program uses the Harvard case-study model[1] for all the management courses as well. By definition, a case study is a "written statement which describes a self-contained, problem-centered writing situation" (Tedlock 253-54). As a simulated on-the-job experience, it includes a problem that calls for written responses, substantial information about the intended audience, and enough details about the writing situation to stimulate the thought processes involved in invention, arrangement, and style--the rhetorical paradigm inherent in the communication process.

The Number-One Consideration: Audience

In developing any document pertaining to a business or professional venture, the number-one consideration is, of course, audience; for what one says and how one says it must meet the needs, interests and expectations of the audience--who invariably must make some critical decision based on the information provided in the document. Thus, a knowledge of audience colors issues about a document's purpose, its selection of details, its logical arrangement, if (and when) a persuasive strategy is appropriate, and even the stylistic character of the writing. Striving to meet audience needs sharply focuses the writer's analytical activity as he/she determines the nature and solution of the problem. As a result, the writer automatically makes a series of rhetorical choices that will serve both the audience

and his/her own professional agendas.

Probably the biggest advantage to the business world of training students to write for specific audiences is that they learn to write with "less cognitive egocentricism" (Tedlock 255).[2] Clearly, one of the biggest advantages to students of using a problem-solving approach is that it puts them into a state of mental "disequilibrium," or what Piaget says stimulates intellectual growth (Tedlock 255).[3]

Our primary method of audience analysis is the "dramatistic" pentad of Kenneth Burke, who is probably the most influential of the great modern rhetorical theorists. The Burkean pentad asks writers to assess the action, agency, scene, agent, and purpose of the organizational situation. Such detailing objectifies what is vital to the situation and, thus, clarifies what is relevant to the audience.[4]

On-the-Job Writing

By the time students have completed both the entry-level MBA course (Managerial Communication) and our first TPC course (Persuasive Writing), they are well grounded in the strategies for evaluating any case study's writing situation; and therefore, they are prepared to transfer this knowledge to their own real on-the-job situations. Because many of our students want to improve their own work on the job, we give them the option--beginning with our second TPC course, Editing and Production--of choosing to develop their class assignments either from a pre-packaged case study (which we provide) or from a writing

situation at work. At this point, most students choose to write from real situations at work.

Some interesting examples of on-the-job writing that my students have produced are:

> A participants' newsletter for the 1989 World Whitewater Championships--developed by Barbara Trask, Director of Community Relations for Whitewater Championships, Inc.
>
> A proposal and series of reports on an oncological nursing-research project--by Ron Kase, a research nurse for Westat Research, Inc.
>
> A proposal and series of reports on instituting a program of legal protocols for protecting victims of spouse and child abuse, developed for the State's Attorney's Office in the city of Frederick, MD--by Sue Shiflett, Director of Heartly House, Inc.

Each of these projects, like many others, has had a productive impact on the organizations for which they were written.

TPC PEDAGOGY: ORGANIZATIONAL-WRITING WORKSHOPS

Not only do we employ the case-study approach, we also emphasize how important understanding an organization's sociological environment is to the writer. Thus, we often develop our case studies in workshops that feature realistic links to business, such as "interactive" writing.

Recent research investigating the nature of on-the-job writing reveals that a writer's behavioral skills for working with other people as he/she develops a document are just as important to successful writing as the ability to write clearly (Redish 119).[5] Interactive writing on the job involves collaboration between the writer and others who have a vested

interest in the final product. Such collaboration, which includes hierarchical criticism, occurs throughout the writing process. Typically, a writer incorporates feedback as he/she invents, arranges, and styles his/her text, until the finished product represents the standards of everyone involved (Coutour and Rymer 89). To be maximally effective, the writer learns how to incorporate different perspectives--from peers, supervisors, even from different departments--into a document that he/she writes, such as a memo or report, and how to suggest revisions to a document that someone else writes--revisions that make the document meet the organizations' standards and yet maintain the writer's own professional ethos, as well as his/her self-esteem (Coutour and Rymer 89).

Our workshop approach helps students develop the necessary interpersonal skills for collaboratively producing effective documents. Students work together, playing different functional roles, to assign and develop writing tasks. Frequently working in hierarchical teams, they account for their perspectives as they secure team approval for the plans, the development, and the final production of their documents. Thus, they learn how to get, and integrate, input from other people, and how to handle themselves during the critical reviews of their, and other people's, drafts.

Interestingly, in the first few of such workshops, tempers flair as students grapple with conceptual, stylistic, and other rhetorical issues. But gradually, as they come to understand the importance of a writing situation's sociology, the flaring

tempers give way to growing appreciation for their mounting interactive skills, as well as for the efficiency that comes from good collaborative relationships, and for the enhanced effectiveness of their finished products.

Making Ideas Visual

During the process of creating such documents, students also learn the importance of, and develop skill at, writing for post-literate audiences. We live in the age of post-literacy, which means that everyone knows how to read, but nobody does--unless they absolutely have to. We all can identify with this situation. We all are bombarded constantly with written information, and we all are so busy that we can't possibly read every word that passes through our field of vision. Therefore, we read only what meets our immediate needs and interests. Nobody, for example, reads a report sequentially--that is, from the first page to the last. Instead, we read a report selectively, which means that we want it written so that what we need leaps off the page without our having to exert any effort at all. To the writer, selective reading means that if he wants to get read, he had better perfect the techniques for making ideas visual--i.e., for formatting ideas and their logical arrangements and for creating graphic designs and other types of illustrations that say visually precisely what the text says. Further, the illustrative materials must be so complete that they can stand independent of the text. Even better, they must be so compellingly attractive and so pointedly directed toward meeting

audience needs that they actually motivate the audience to read the text.

Thus, a major focus in all our courses is making words visual. Students learn how to make visual supports for both texts and oral presentations. Their visuals must not only focus audience attention on the specific points under discussion, they also must generate the intellectual movement necessary to bring the audience to the conclusions that the writer or speaker desires.

Making ideas visual is, of course, highly creative as well as analytical. Students seem particularly to enjoy such creativity. Very quickly, they discover how superbly effective such integrative activity is to clarifying their own thinking, as well as to moving audiences to desired action.

To facilitate their creative work, we encourage students to learn the art of desk-top publishing; for having its graphic, formatting, and illustrative capabilities right at their fingertips gives them a tremendous advantage in the marketplace (Webb 49-53). From time to time we invite guest speakers--desktop publishing experts--to fill us in on all the ropes.

In addition, at our Frostburg campus we provide our students with a fully equipped IBM-compatible word-processing laboratory to help them perfect their skills, and we often conduct our workshop classes in the lab for the same purpose.

Developing a State-of-the-Art Professional Writing Style

Another major focus is the development of a state-of-the-art

professional writing style. Students learn not only how to polish their grammar, punctuation, and usage skills, they also learn how to take command of these skills--i.e., to master the language by making grammar, punctuation, and usage work for them as actual tools of rhetorical force.

Because the various types of sentence organization carry definable expressive powers (Weaver, Composition 169), a writer can consciously use these organizational patterns to generate his own vision in the mind of his audience. Grammatical constructions, for example, are filters of a writer's way of seeing things. A grammatical filter focuses the structure of an idea and, therefore, it actually directs rhetorical force (Weaver, "Grammatical Categories" 116-17). The audience receives the writer's idea through the filter because its grammatical construction actually generates the necessary intellectual movement to receive the idea.[6] State-of-the-art writing, therefore, does not leave this rhetorical phenomenon to chance. Hence, we teach our students to write sentences that are not only technically correct, but that bear structures which create the appropriate rhetorical force for the ideas they carry. Specifically, students learn that the following ways of styling sentences have definable (and therefore consciously usable) rhetorical force:

> Cumulative and periodic sentences generate deductive and inductive logic.
>
> Sentence patterns generate specific movements of mind (like cause-effect reasoning).

Straightforward and inverted syntax create meaning and emphasis.

Figuration visualizes abstract ideas, clarifies values, and generates dimensions of meaning.

Levels of generality in diction affect precision and, therefore, accuracy.

Punctuation produces clarity.

By definition, a state-of-the-art writing style employs the techniques for achieving the very qualities of writing that the business and professional communities have been demanding vociferously from the universities: the qualities of accuracy, brevity, and clarity, or the ABCs of writing style (Eisenberg 146). To achieve these qualities, a writer must hone his/her style to get rid of excess verbiage as well as excess density and complexity. Hence, we teach our students to identify these stylistic problems in their own work and in others' work too; and we give them the techniques for editing them out. The objective is to produce a style devoid of ambiguities, a style that meets the needs of post-literate audiences because it says what it's supposed to say in as few words as possible and with maximum rhetorical effect.

Such mastery of the language is very exacting; but our students do it, and they report that it actually changes their lives. They learn that <u>what</u> they say is actually <u>how</u> they say it, and that such a close attention to linguistic detail is just as important to achieving their purposes as is logical structure, persuasive argument, and making ideas visual.

Essentially then, our students learn the state-of-the-art writing style that makes them highly marketable as professionals who write and/or as career writers. One of my students, for example, Ron Kase (the research nurse who conducted and reported on the oncological project I mentioned a few minutes ago), told me just the other day that he is currently negotiating with a firm that wants to hire him this spring after he completes his MBA degree. The salary they are offering him is $67,500! He attributes this figure largely to the advanced communication skills he offers them, as evidenced in the writing samples he provided--the expertise he acquired directly in our TPC program.

Ron Kase's success in the marketplace is typical of our TPC graduates, though his proposed salary is higher than normal. The record shows our graduates either finding excellent jobs, and/or rapidly moving upward in their organizational hierarchies, or pursuing Ph.D. degrees in Rhetoric and Composition at major universities. Their success, in turn, measures our success by bringing us more and more students, by generating RFPs for corporate training programs and consulting jobs for instructors, and by generally advancing the status of our MBA degree and our university. Not surprisingly, our graduates frequently attribute their success to their advanced communication skills; and they express a special gratitude for the wide-open perspective that informs and empowers those skills. This perspective comes from the TPC Option's humanistic core--which, as you can see, is a practical introduction to the study of rhetoric.

TPC OPTION'S HUMANISTIC CORE

Rhetoric engages the whole person. For both writer and audience, rhetoric energizes their ways of knowing and valuing, or to use the philosophical terms, their epistemologies and axiologies. Hence, a writer who seeks to generate maximum effects needs to know what his audience regards as knowledge and how he arrives at knowledge. Knowledge, of course, is inextricably bound up with values; and so the writer also needs to understand what his audience regards as valuable and how he determines value. This fact becomes especially important as we seek more and more international marketplace opportunities. If we are to work successfully with other peoples, we must account for their epistemologies and axiologies. This fact is just as true for corporate communities seeking to expand into profit-making empires as it is for our universities seeking to market educational programs to foreign audiences.

What makes the TPC Option a truly humanistic component to the MBA degree program is that, as a form of rhetoric, it too engages the whole person--not just his pragmatic side, but his whole intellectual, ethical, and emotional being. There is much pleasure, for example, in merging pragmatic and artistic issues in writing, say, a quarterly report. There is even more pleasure when the report generates the action that the writer wants.

The TPC Option helps students to develop and integrate the kind of practical knowledge, ethical considerations, and aesthetic activities that lead to productive decisions on the job, as well as wise career choices and subsequent financial

rewards. Thus, as a humanistic program, it lays out the paths to both professional success and personal joy. Wasn't it Aristotle who said that the purpose of education is to increase one's capacity for joy? We humanists must agree.

PLATO HAS CONCRETIZED INTO WALL STREET

What makes the TPC Option's overall approach humanistic is that it teaches the traditions of western rhetoric from Plato to the present. These are, fundamentally, what work with any audience, despite their different value systems and ways of knowing. These traditions are ultimately what bring us profits.

Consider for a moment what makes western free enterprise--and American enterprise in particular--so engaging, so spectacular, and ultimately so successful. What lies at the root of our entrepreneurial spirit? The thinking of such enterprise is fundamentally categorical, and its rhetorical thrust is always on the audience, even though its ultimate goal is always profits. For example, Dean Witter's promotional slogan is typical: "We measure success one investor at a time" (italics mine). As Jim W. Corder, one of our leading rhetorical theorists, says: "Rhetoric is everything."

The complex patterns of categorical thinking and the intellectual, ethical, and emotional strategies of centering on audience--which all trace back to Plato and Aristotle[7]--constitute the nature of Western rhetoric. And western rhetoric is responsible for creating the very shape of the western mind. Therefore, it is also responsible for generating our ideological

institutions--like democracy and free enterprise. More specifically, categorical thinking created such concepts as managerial hierarchies, such practical applications as business departments, and such concrete commercial products as computers. And centering on audience to meet their needs, interests, and expectations is what brings us profits.

The point I am trying to make here is that the theory of western rhetoric, from classical times to the present, explains the power behind all real western circumstances, including business and professional enterprise. And the strategies of western rhetoric are what empower democratic and free enterprise. Indeed, Plato has concretized into Wall Street. In the TPC Option, we help our students to objectify the traditions of western rhetoric--to define, describe and apply them--so that they too can use them to maximum effect in their professional lives.

OUT OF THE PAST, INTO THE FUTURE

Now, as our university seeks to articulate agreements with schools and other organizations around the world, we must come to understand these new audiences, whose ways of knowing and valuing are vastly different from our own. But even here, our rhetorical traditions will serve us well. Categorical thinking will help us identify their epistemologies and axiologies, and centering on audience will help us create successful marketing tactics, as well as appropriate pedagogies and practical applications. Thus, our own rhetorical traditions will make it possible for us as

professional-communication educators to bring everyone who seeks our help into productive relationship with the global marketplace.

Notes

[1]See John L. Di Gaetani's "Use of the Case Study Method in Teaching Business Communication," Writing in the Business Professions, Myra Rosen (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English and the Association for Business Communication, 1989): 187-201.

[2]See Barry M. Kroll's "Cognitive Egocentricism and the Problem of Audience Awareness in Written Discourse," Research in the Teaching of English, 12 (October 1978), 269-281.

[3]See Lee Odell's "Piaget, Problem-Solving, and Freshman Composition," College Composition and Communication, 23 (February 1973), 36-42.

[4]See Kenneth Burke's "A Dramatistic View of the Origins of Language," Quarterly Journal of Speech 38 (1952): 241-264: A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); "Questions and Answers About the Pentad," College Composition and Communication 29 (1978): 330-335, all cited in Bielawski and Parks, Organizational Writing (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987): 19.

[5]See Paul Anderson's "What Survey Research Tells Us about Writing at Work," in Writing in Nonacademic Settings, ed. Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami (New York: Guilford Press, 1985): 3-83. C. Gilbert Storms' "What Business School Graduates Say about the Writing They Do at Work: Implications for the Business Communication Course," ABCA Bulletin, 46, 4 (1983): 13-18. Barrie Van Dyck's "On the Job Writing of High Level Business Executives" (Paper read at 31st Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, D.C., 1980), cited in Goswami et. al., Writing in the Professions: A Course Guide and Instructional Materials for an Advanced Composition Course (Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, 1981).

[6]See Richard Weaver's "Some Rhetorical Aspects of Grammatical Categoires," in his The Ethics of Rhetoric (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953): 116-142.

[7]See Edward P. J. Corbett's "What Classical Rhetoric Has to Offer the Teacher and the Student of Business and Professional Writing," Writing in the Business Professions, ed. Myra Kogen (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English): 65-72. Richard Weaver's "The Phaedrus and the Nature of Rhetoric." Language Is Sermonic. Eds. Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979): 57-83.

Works Cited

Coutour, Barbara and Joan Rymer. "Interactive Writing on the Job: Definitions and Implications of Collaboration." Writing in the Business Professions. Ed. Myra Kogen. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989. 73-93.

Eisenberg, Anne. Effective Technical Communication. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982. 145-155.

Redish, Janice. "Writing in Organizations." Writing in the Business Professions. Ed. Myra Kogen. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989. 97-124.

Tedlock, David. "The Case Approach to Composition." College Composition and Communication 32.3 (1981). 253-61.

Weaver, Richard. Composition: A Course in Writing and Rhetoric. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957.

_____. "Some Rhetorical Aspects of Grammatical Categories." In his The Ethics of Rhetoric. Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953. 116-142.

Webb, Craig. "What Are You Worth?" Publish 4.12 (1989). 49-53.